

Covid-19 Part 2: *virus v. world*

Philosophy thrives when you have time on your hands.

Our [last Covid topic](#) focused on the biomedical science and philosophy thereof: on making momentous decisions under conditions of scientific uncertainty and the ensuing issues of transparency and trust. This time we touch on a selection of debates involving broader questions in ethics, social, and political philosophy.

1. Is it really evil to consider the economy when saving lives?

Regina Rini and Richard Yetter Chappell take issue with each other:

[“When to think like a utilitarian: Why we must show reluctance if the time comes to weigh human life against the economy,”](#) Regina Rini, *TLS*.

Is there something “inherently horrible or uncaring” about asking any questions not directly about “saving lives”? Even—or perhaps, especially—in a crisis? [Richard Yetter Chappell offers a critique](#) of Rini’s position.

2. When did sunbathing in the park become a moral issue?

[“‘Can I sunbathe in the park?’ is now a deep moral question: Coronavirus gives fresh urgency to philosophers’ struggle with the conflict between individual choice and the common good,”](#) Alison Hills, *The Guardian*.

3. Are you a *continuist* or a *discontinuist*? (Will you still be loved tomorrow?)

[“Will the future be like the past? Making sense of experiences in and of the corona crisis,”](#) Martin Lenz, *Handling Ideas*. Writes Lenz, “Now how does having one or the other attitude affect your experience? As a continuist who retains your goals you will likely want to stick to your strategies and go back to normal if possible. The current restrictions (contact restrictions or lockdowns) will probably feel rather disruptive. By contrast, a discontinuist might welcome the disruption as a way of preparing for an uncertain future. So my guess is that there is a

correlation between being a discontinuist and having a more positive attitude towards the disruptive measures.”

4. When is enough enough? (And, while we are asking, enough of *what*, specifically?)

“[When Will the Pandemic Cure Be Worse Than the Disease?](#)” Peter Singer and Michael Plant, *Project Syndicate*. “It pains us to say it, but US President Donald Trump is right: ‘[We cannot let the cure be worse than the disease.](#)’ Lockdowns have health benefits: fewer will die of COVID-19, as well as other transmissible diseases. But they have real social and economic costs: social isolation, unemployment, and widespread bankruptcies, to name three. These ills are not yet fully apparent, but they soon will be.”

5. Should lockdown be voluntary or coerced?

To avoid the [tragedy of the commons](#), people need to feel that sacrifices are distributed fairly. To get that assurance, we need community/state coercion, according to Alberto Giubilini, who writes, “State coercion is necessary to solve the problem of assurance, thus preserving fairness and making it more likely that the kind of cooperation necessary to achieve the collective good is realised. You ought to (be coerced to) stay home, even if it makes no difference,” he writes in “[Why You Should Not \(Be Allowed To\) Have That Picnic in the Park, Even if it Does Not Make a Difference](#),” *Practical Ethics* (Oxford University)—to no resounding consensus.

6. Let’s hope Ioannadis and co. are *not* right, or we won’t learn anything

“[A strange paradox: the better we manage to contain the coronavirus pandemic, the less we will learn from it.](#)” Maarten Boudry, *The Conversation*.

When this whole crisis is over, and, if it turns out far fewer people die than we were initially led to believe, sceptics like Prof. Ioannadis and company are going to say, “I told you so.” *And this is bad!*, says Boudry, because it will leave us complacent and more vulnerable to the really big, Trump-size, pandemic *yet to come* that will do a number on our evolutionary prospects. Thus, we will learn little from the experience if this pandemic ends with a whimper. This virus will have cried “wolf”...

7. Or we could do the Schopenhauer, or the Seneca, or the Montaigne, etc. thing...

[“To Find Peace in the Time of Coronavirus, Be Very, Very Pessimistic, Says Philosopher Alain De Botton”](#) [Interview] by Ayelett Shani, *Haaretz*, Apr 02, 2020. “The only way to achieve inner peace at times like these is to focus on the worst-case scenario, claims British philosopher and author Alain de Botton”

8. “What would Kant make of your recent toilet paper purchases?”

[“Coronavirus: what philosopher Immanuel Kant can teach us about panic buying and isolation dodging.”](#) Matthew Barnard, *The Conversation*. Nietzsche says don’t hoard because it shows how low class you are. Hoarding is so herd-like. Kant says don’t hoard because, if you universalize hoarding, you will make it impossible for people to hoard because there won’t be any left for anyone to hoard. Ergo, it is imperative to preserve the opportunity to hoard without actually hoarding. The preservation of this opportunity, *while not actually taking it*, is a testament to your rational autonomy which you display by putting on a show of *not* being subject to the laws (or “calls,” as the case may be) of nature.

9. Which case fatality rate? The one where elderly die or the one where children die?

[“Why a one-size-fits-all approach to COVID-19 could have lethal consequences.”](#) Alex Broadbent and Benjamin T H Smart, *The Conversation*. “Suppose you had the choice between two health policies, A and B. Policy A would result in the death of a lot of elderly people. Policy B would result in the death of a lot of children, especially infants. Which would you choose?...

“In Africa, millions will starve if the global economy enters a protracted downturn. We must ask whether the number will be more than COVID-19 will kill in a region where only 6.09% of the population is over 65.... Mass unemployment means mass poverty, which means mass starvation....

“The crunch question is this: what is the case fatality rate of social distancing in Africa? We have no idea; but that is the figure that should be considered when implementing social distancing measures. The scientific community, including both epidemiologists and economists working together, should be putting as much effort into estimating that case fatality rate as into estimating it for COVID-19...

“In the bubonic plague, the aristocracy left London for the countryside; the poor of London could not isolate themselves, and so they died. This may be our situation.”

10. In a crisis, the value of a “united front” may trump epistemic transparency.

[“The Right to Know and the Duty to Inform: A Lesson from the Italian Experience with Covid-19.”](#) Michel Croce, *Cardiff University Blogs: Open for Debate*. “The problem that I want to identify lies in our understanding of what the right to know and the duty to inform amount to in a practical sense. We have become accustomed to thinking that we deserve to be informed of any minimal, marginal, or tentative development of relevant issues and, conversely, that institutional bodies and the media owe us constant updates. ... While this might work well in some contexts (e.g. sports or political elections), it can have harmful effects in other circumstances: for example, in situations characterized by a high level of uncertainty and pressure even on those who are most prepared to handle large-scale threats.” Croce thinks that institutional authority must suppress factual and policy qualms to effectively handle crises. Expert disagreement, for example, should take a back seat to leadership. *Tell them anything, but whatever you do, don’t waver...* Is this scary, or what?

11. Thanks to this virus your visits to the “loo” will soon be hackable.

[“Surveillance, Privacy and COVID-19,”](#) an extended podcast interview with Carissa Véliz by John Danaher at Philosophical Disquisitions. Véliz is Research Fellow at the Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics and the Wellcome Centre for Ethics and Humanities, both at Oxford, and writes extensively on digital ethics. She explains why privacy is important and how its devaluation during crises offer opportunities to expand power asymmetries. Post 911 policies created the legal spaces for our current data economy at the expense of privacy concerns. Recall Mark Zuckerberg who, echoing his predecessors, said privacy is no longer a “social norm”? Google and Apple are now developing Bluetooth and GPS apps as proxies for generating location data for contact tracing. Should this be a priority when so little has been done to enable reliable bio testing that results in more consequential data for determining the lethality of a disease? And with the result that extreme responses are being taken from a standpoint of institutional ignorance? Instead, resources and attention are diverted to the revision of “social norms” around privacy. Privacy is a bulwark against power abuse. Crisis opportunism is on display, again, Véliz argues.

Resources

Philosophers are having a field day with the ramifications of this topic. Jef Delvaux is compiling a list of bibliographic resources on philosophical reactions to Covid-19. Many of the items above were culled from a quick scan of this list (it goes on for 29 pages):

[Covid-19 & Philosophy: Towards a Bibliography](#)

Appendix: “There’s no evidence for that.”

Consider the following scenario:

1. Suppose the lethality (infection fatality rate, IFR) of the SARS-CoV-2 virus really turns out to be significantly greater than the seasonal flu. Suppose it settles at 1%, making it *10 times more lethal* than the seasonal flu (at 0.1%).¹
2. And, suppose infection with SARS-CoV-2 does *not* confer significant immunity. If you get it, you are open to getting it again, just like the common cold.
3. And, suppose there will *not* be a vaccine for this virus, not 18 months from now—not ever, perhaps.

In light of a frequently heard retort these days, “there’s no evidence for that,” what can we say about each possibility *and* the conjunction of them?

In favor of 1, it’s been claimed by some members of the containment, or curve-flattening, crew that “there is no evidence” that Covid-19 is *only* as lethal as the seasonal flu. So they would find this supposition plausible.

In favor of 2, it’s been claimed by some members of the containment, or curve-flattening, crew that “there is no evidence” that infection with Covid-19 results in any significant immunity. So they would find this supposition plausible.

In favor of 3, many on all sides, but especially among the herd immunity crew, have suggested that, since we don’t have any vaccines against other coronaviruses, what makes us think we will develop a vaccine for this one? We have “no evidence for that.” Yes, there is no evidence

¹ It is possible we are being “[gaslighted](#)” by Mother Nature—to anthropomorphize a bit? Might she be a narcissist? And we too codependent?

for thinking we are going to get a vaccine against the SARS-CoV-2 virus—and some evidence that we will *not* in the foreseeable future:

Seventeen years after the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) outbreak and seven years since the first Middle East respiratory syndrome (Mers) case, there is still no coronavirus vaccine despite dozens of attempts to develop them.²

SARS and MERS, the almost-as-nasty coronacousins³ of SARS-CoV-2, we haven't been able to vaccinate against, even after all this time—not to mention the coronaviruses implicated in the common cold. Again, there is no vaccine against *any* coronavirus, not even after many decades⁴ of familiarity with them.

So, if we imagine—as seems plausible if having no evidence to the contrary is an indication of anything—that *all three items on the list are true*, what follows?

It means that every year we will have a massive die off of “vulnerables” until we exhaust the supply. Moreover, Covid-19 will wait you out until you are a “vulnerable” however many years that takes. Get used to it. Either that, or institute a seasonal lockdown to go with your seasonal respiratory disease.

But there is evidence, plenty, that we get used to risks once they become familiar and predictable. Several million people could die every year of anything and, so long as it was regular, it would become part of “the cost of living” in a style we are used to. Once we start to see the virus every year, it will become ho hum.

This explains how we can slowly come to tolerate climate change: wildfires in California, Australia, heat waves in Europe, locusts in Africa, famines and floods, tornadoes and typhoons, etc.... *We get used to it.* Like, in the U.S., we got used to 35,000 people dying every year from motor vehicle accidents without any talk of a rule about keeping six feet between people and their cars.

Of course, the right thing to do is always to try our damndest to do something! To rail against the machine, nature, and ourselves!

² “[There was no vaccine for Sars or Mers. Will there be one for the new coronavirus?](#)” Josephine Ma and Simone McCarthy, *South China Morning Post*, 22 Feb, 2020.

³ MERS is actually deadlier than SARS-CoV-2 with a mortality rate [over 37%](#) for those infected but a far lower infection rate number (R_0). It doesn't spread so easily.

⁴ They were first [discovered in the 1930s](#).

So that future alien archaeologists will not unearth our collective stupidity. *We put up a fight! Let the record show.* But we can go about it more gracefully than we seem to be doing.

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Next up: Covid-19 Part 3: Lessons from *The Plague* by Albert Camus. An “existentialist” take on ceasing to exist.

Unprocessed Notes

[“Climate and coronavirus: the science is not the same.”](#) Eric Schliesser and Eric Winsberg
“Comparing scientific research into climate change with new findings about coronavirus is a false equivalence. When we look at Covid-19, we need transparency and critical discussion in order to ‘trust the science, say Eric Schliesser and Eric Winsberg.”

[“It’s All Just Beginning,”](#) by Justin E. H. Smith, *Examined Life*.

[“Ethicists agree on who gets treated first when hospitals are overwhelmed by coronavirus.”](#)
Olivia Goldhill, *Quartz*.

[“Governmental gaslighting? Communication in the corona crisis,”](#) Martin Lenz, *Handling Ideas*.

Themes

Different conceptions of the “goods” to be considered for maximization if you are a utilitarian.

Are all goods open to being bartered via a utilitarian calculus: such as rights, privacy, or autonomy? What happens when utilitarian goals entail sacrificing these? Or is every human good fungible?

And once goods are sacrificed, assuming the sacrifices can be justified temporarily out of concerns not to be an exception (Kantian anti-exceptionalism) or from a sense of solidarity with the suffering of others (Marxism), for how long? What justifies calling something an “emergency” that entails these sacrifices? What responsibilities go with such a declaration?

Does the saving of some lives necessarily entail the sacrifice of others?

Are we justified, in emergencies, deviating from non-emergency ethics? Are less than fully vetted policies defensible because of the dire circumstances?

How do we cope when all options are bad? Is there value in being lucid about the darkness of the situation?

How much can we force people to do things that they express through their words or behavior that things being forced upon them are not in their best interests? Who decides what is in your best interest?

Is a crisis something to endure then forget, or an opportunity for change and progress?

Updates

“Scream inside your heart.”

NPR story:

['Please Scream Inside Your Heart,' Japanese Amusement Park Tells Thrill-Seekers](#)

Video:

<https://youtu.be/PMm5QVZ6QeY>